

The Great Jerusalem Artichoke Circus: the Buying and Selling of the Rural American Dream

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Iowa, might serve a similar purpose for a blue-collar city characterized by diversity.

Lewis works at the complex intersection of three types of history: urban, religious, and congregational. He draws on an abundance of sources, including congregational and regional manuscript collections, interviews and personal correspondence, local newspapers, census reports, pamphlets describing Gary and its organizations, as well as an impressive array of secondary sources written by authoritative contemporary historians of both urbanization and religion. The volume contains several tables on topics such as the population and religious membership of Gary and characteristics of the two featured local congregations. In addition, two dozen illustrations, including photographs of pastors and edifices, enhance the book. Lewis's well-conceived and attractively written study should evoke interest from a number of audiences: scholars of religious and urban history, enthusiasts for local and regional history, and practitioners of sophisticated congregational history.

The Great Jerusalem Artichoke Circus: The Buying and Selling of the Rural American Dream, by Joseph A. Amato. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. xxxiv, 244 pp. Illustrations, notes, tables, appendix, bibliography, index. \$44.95 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

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Joseph A. Amato's *The Great Jerusalem Artichoke Circus: The Buying and Selling of the Rural American Dream* provides a history of the rise and fall of American Energy Farming System (AEFS), a company in southwestern Minnesota that sold over twenty-five million dollars worth of Jerusalem artichoke seed to buyers concentrated primarily in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa during an eighteen-month period from late 1981 to early 1983. Amato describes his work as a "cultural history of a recent episode in national agricultural history," with a "full cast of characters," including "desperate farmers, greedy small-time speculators, unemployed ministers, charismatic salesmen, irrepressible boosters, legitimate and illegitimate scientists, a range of consultants, and a parade of attorneys, public officials, investigators . . ." (xxix, xxviii). Amato asserts that the phenomenal success of Jerusalem artichoke seed sales is connected to several social, economic, and cultural developments of the early Reagan years: evangelical Christianity combined with high-technology hucksterism, the collapse of the farm economy, and a resurgence of national myths "about the uniqueness of America, its land, its countryside, and its farmers" (49).

Amato devotes most of his attention to sketching the major "stars" in his cast, explaining their complicated financial machinations, and describing their successful prosecution by a young county attorney in rural Minnesota. Fred Hendrickson, the "ideas man," saw himself as a prophet who, through the Jerusalem artichoke, would save farmers, solve the nation's energy crisis, and become rich himself. His partner was the highly leveraged road contractor, James Dwire, a recent convert to evangelical Christianity, who concluded that sales of Jerusalem artichoke seeds would provide the capital he needed. They were joined by the Reverend L. D. Kramer, a former televangelist who had made millions on a chain of nursing homes, only to file for bankruptcy when investigated by the SEC. Although Amato makes it clear that all three raked off as much money as possible from their endeavor, he does not present these men as one-dimensional villains, but as complex characters with mixed motives who deluded themselves as much as others.

Reflecting his reliance on legal and public documents, Amato's "cast of characters" becomes more general when he moves beyond the major players in the company and prosecution. Amato divides the twenty-five hundred buyers into seven different (and sometimes overlapping) groups, but only briefly describes them, and thus they remain generalized prototypes, not real people. The author provides fairly vague statements about folks who took "their last gamble," others who wanted to "get in on the ground floor," members of religious communities, and some who succumbed to "the power of 'me-too-ism'" (72-73). Although footnotes provide some useful data on acreage planted by three-year growers, Amato offers little information on how different kinds of buyers perceived their own risk-taking behavior, viewed the demise of the company, or coped with their losses. Sources for these issues are obviously more difficult to obtain, but it is curious that Amato did not conduct oral history interviews with several of the individual buyers. By omitting those voices, Amato leaves many unanswered questions.

Finally, *The Great Jerusalem Artichoke Circus* is extremely repetitive. Amato constantly reiterates observations about the main players, sometimes using the same words and anecdotes. Along with the skimpy details on the actual seed buyers, the countless repetitions detract from the effectiveness of this local history.

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